



STAFF FILE PHOTO/SUSIE KOCKERSCHIEDT

Youth homelessness under microscope in region

United Way, university launch learning sessions

BY CHRIS TRABER
ctraber@yrmg.com

The spotlight is about to shine on youth homelessness in the region.

York Region's front-line social service workers and school board administrators launched the first of seven learning sessions focused on youth homelessness Tuesday.

Hosted by United Way York Region and York University at the Markham Convergence Centre, the series seeks to develop an integrated response to the growing number of young people dropping off the social radar. The programs feature far-flung keynote speakers sharing their strategies and successes.

Niagara Resource Service for Youth executive director Mike Lethby shared research findings and initiatives resulting from a study on access to employment for homeless people in the Niagara Region.

Working with at-risk youth and their families, he helped move his region's youth service model from a reactive institutional crisis model to a preventative community model.

Mr. Lethby, who established

HAVE YOUR SAY

► What solutions would you like to see in place to address youth homelessness? E-mail jmason@yrmg.com

the non-profit Foundation of Resources for Teens, told attendees many aspects of youth homelessness in Niagara mirror that of York Region.

There's a lack of support for youth in rural communities as services are concentrated in urban hubs, he said. Youth are most vulnerable to addictions, sexual exploitation, violence and legal issues.

He discovered there was no research or regional system for the prevention of youth homelessness.

That changed when his study was completed in 2006.

Niagara's regional government, social service agencies, shelters and the public and Catholic school boards rallied to study the cause and effect of homelessness. Research determined 80 per cent of Niagara youth identified conflict at home as the cause of their homelessness.

Further, they discovered the median age of homeless youth is 16, half were from rural com-

munities and all respondents said their situation was a consequence of multiple stressors.

Based on findings, stakeholders developed a community-based prevention strategy allowing youth to stay in school while stabilizing their housing, all the while helping youth and their families connect to local support services.

Outcomes were encouraging, Mr. Lethby said. In 100 per cent of cases, a young person's homelessness received a response within 48 hours and in 85 per cent of cases, youth received income support access. Systemwide, shelter use by youth was reduced by 15 per cent.

... the series seeks to develop an integrated response to the growing number of young people dropping off the social radar.

Blue Door Shelters executive director Patti Bell said she was buoyed by the meeting and prospect of similar research in York Region.

"It'll be fabulous to have the

cold hard facts on York Region," she said. "It will energize everyone to move forward. Meaningful research will give teeth to youth services. A collaborative effort, together with like-minded people, will result in accessible services to youth with better impact."

The partnership with York University will provide four student researchers, who will focus on a regional youth homeless study beginning in May. United Way knowledge mobilization officer Jane Wedlock said.

The session was an important first step, York Region District School Board community resource facilitator Yvonne Kelly said.

Ms. Kelly, who also provides volunteer advocacy work for York Region's Food Network and Social Planning Council, suggested it would be helpful to have peer research through our high schools.

Food Network executive director Joan Stonehocker was enthused at the notion solutions to youth homelessness will be approached with a focus on prevention rather than crisis management.

"If we can catch kids while they're in school, we can prevent a whole series of disruptions," she said.

GET INVOLVED

► The series is for professionals from various sectors across York Region, including education, child protection, health, children and youth mental health, hospitals, youth justice, police, social service organizations and regional, provincial and federal government.

► Each session includes a keynote presentation, questions and answers and facilitated discussion.

► The next two sessions have been confirmed.

► Addressing homelessness and mental health challenges is the focus on March 8 from 9 to 11 a.m. The keynote is by Cheryl Forchuk, Ph.D., professor and associate director of nursing research, Arthur Labatt Family School of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Western Ontario. Registration begins at 8:30 a.m. in the Magna Room, Aurora Library 15145 Yonge Street, Aurora.

► On April 5, 9 to 11 a.m., at the Markham Convergence Centre, 7271 Warden Ave., with registration at 8:30 a.m. The topic is *Joining the dots: understanding the links between child protection and youth homelessness*. Keynote: Naomi Nichols, Ph.D., applied social scientist, Learning Institute at the Hospital for Sick Children and adjunct professor, Queen's-Trent Concurrent Education Program.

► For information and to register, contact Jane Wedlock, knowledge mobilization officer, United Way York Region, at 905-474-9974 ext. 223 or e-mail to jwedlock@uwyr.on.ca

Moving?

Goldbook.ca has you covered from Real Estate Agents and Brokers to Moving and Storage companies.

goldbook.ca

your local ONLINE business directory